ALASKA MARINE HIGHWAY
— 50TH ANNIVERSARY —

Highway Hostess

Preface: This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Alaska Marine Highway. During the summer of 1963, Alaska was a new state when three ferries came on line in Southeast Alaska. Juneau was as landlocked then as it is now but with fewer opportunities to reach the contiguous United States. By air, Pan American Airways and Pacific Northern Airways each flew only one flight daily to Seattle. Others in Southeast flew floatplanes or other small craft to reach Ketchikan and Juneau for connections to these southbound flights. By sea, the Alaska Steamship Company and Canadian Pacific had discontinued passenger service to Juneau.

Now these new ferries would connect our region with the rest of Alaska through the Haines Highway and to the lower 48 through the Alcan Highway via Haines or Prince Rupert, B. C. Before that, Juneau's only land connection was between Juneau and Haines on the 121-foot M/V Chilkoot, a former World War II landing craft with a day lounge and room for 14 cars, 20 passengers and a cruising speed of nine knots. The cruiseship-like ferries would be 352 feet long and carry 500 passengers and 108 cars while traveling at 22 knots.

A Marine Highway pamphlet listed accommodations to include "a dining room, snack bar, cocktail lounge, airplane-type reclining chairs, and a helpful stewardess." During this first summer, I was one of those stewardesses, officially employed as hostesses, and one of the new agency's first employees from Juneau. This story, Highway Hostess, tells how I remember that significant time.

I always wanted to be on the water. My childhood was peppered with the mysteries, smells and vocabulary of a fishing family. My grandfather came to Juneau in 1918 to fish on his boat the F/V Thelma, and later my father fished

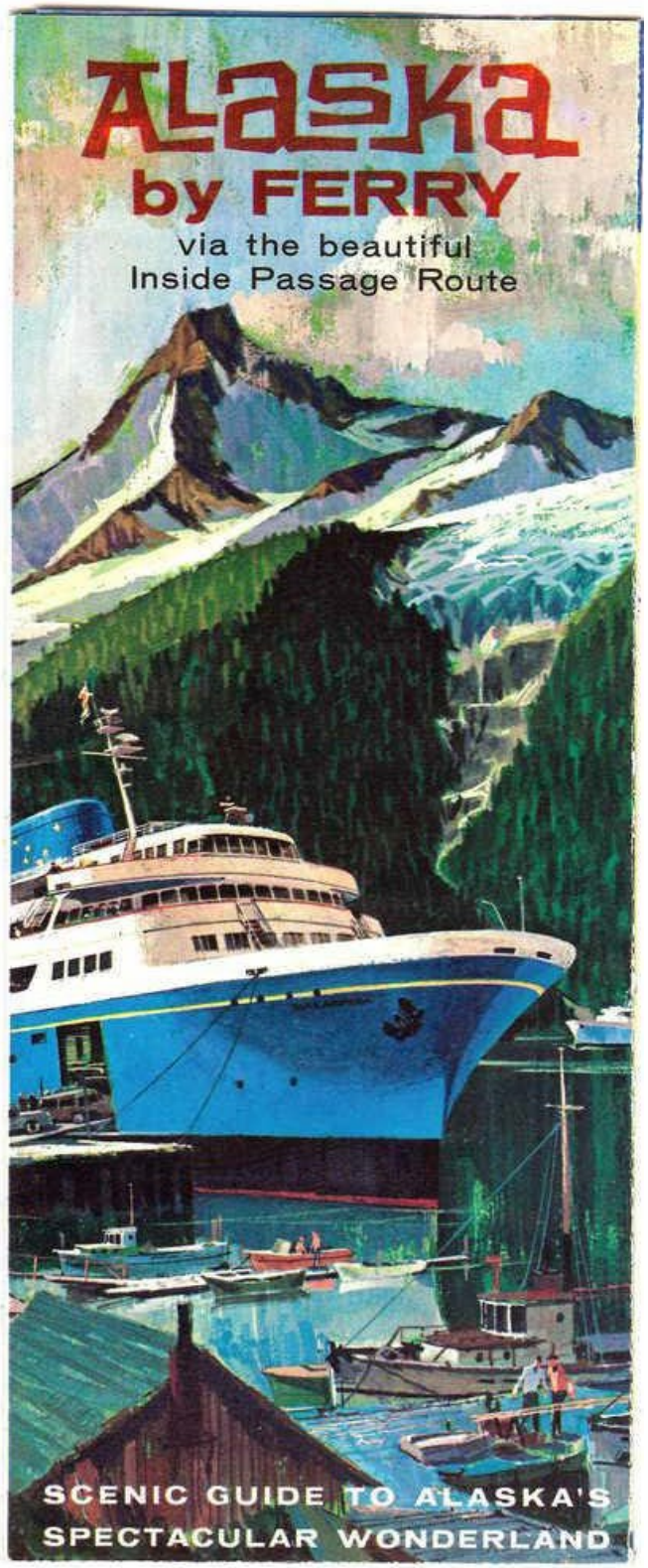
with him. I can still see him mending nets and attaching hooks in his closet workspace, his workmen's fingers moving like a dance in a steady rhythm. My family often met his boat, watching as the crew unloaded halibut near the fishy-smelling Cold Storage on South Franklin.

When my dad later skippered the M/V Grizzly Bear for the Fish and Wildlife Service, he invited me aboard for a visit to Sitka when I was 14-years old. This was a rare and treasured occasion, for his Norwegian heritage dictated a woman's place was at home. He loaned me his stateroom for the journey, but I spent most of my time sitting in the V of the bow holding onto the guide wire, watching the porpoise skip and shoosh through the bow waves, smelling the cool, briny breeze on my face. I enjoyed the rare company of my father at the wheel behind me, his quiet, steady presence and the chug of the diesels comforting me. And I knew that, somehow, I wanted to experience that environment again.

So it was with a sense of adventure three years later on a windswept, sunny spring day that a high school classmate and I took the Chilkoot ferry from Tee Harbor to Haines for a spring break. A former World War II landing craft, it carried14 cars and cramped passenger space. The brainchild of Lt. Cmdr. Steve L. Homer, service had begun nine years earlier. It was Alaska's first link to the lower 48 states via the Haines Highway to the Alcan Highway. At 9 knots, I got a good, long fix of being on the water again.

Then in 1961, I took a summer job with the newly created Division of Marine Transportation for the Department of Public Works. B. E. "Lew" Lewellen, a retired U. S. Navy rear admiral and the division's first director, hired me as the sole staff person before others came on board as the summer progressed. That first office was located in the former Cooper Building, on the corner of the current Court Building plaza site at 4th and Main.

My duties were what Lewellen referred to in a letter as “varied and sometimes complex,” but it was exciting to be at the beginning of what was then called the Alaska State Ferry System. These



floating highways, registered on the Federal Aid system with numbers assigned as if they were land highways, would connect Alaska with the lower 48 states. It was fun to pour over the specifications for the first three vessels and watch as changes to them came through the office. I was sorry to leave my position before heading to college that fall, but it wasn’t to be the end of my association with Lewellen.

A year later, I received a card from the Admiral offering me a summer job either in the office or as hostess aboard one of the new ferries for the inaugural 1963 summer season. I’d already researched the possibilities of working aboard Matson Line vessels, so the decision was easy. Six hostesses would be hired, two assigned to each of the three ferries as they came on line. The two would work alternate weeks, one with the A crew and the other with the B crew. The

salary offered, $504.70 a month or $2.91 an hour with subsistence pay while on duty, was more than I'd ever earned. By the end of summer, it would cover most of my college expenses. The state also offered a quarterly uniform allowance and employer-financed health, welfare and retirement benefits. I couldn't believe my luck.

The August 6, 1962 "Announcement of Position Vacancy" spelled out the job description which included Alaska resident preference: "Under the supervision of the Purser will be responsible for the welfare of the passengers and assisting the aged, ill or handicapped persons, women with small children, and preparing baby formulas as may be required. Will greet the passengers, describe the voyage and points of interest, answer inquiries, operate the public address system, operate movies and slide projectors, and disseminate tourist information. Employment is exempt from State Personnel Act." An information sheet for passengers informed readers that "A hostess is aboard to answer many of your questions about the ship and the ports of call. Call on her to assist in any way possible. Usually she can be located at the Purser's Office."

I was to perform these duties in two-inch heels, one of the uniform requirements, on a moving, sometimes bouncing vessel. The uniform, designed by a former Pan American Airlines stewardess (not yet called flight attendants) looked much like the airline's. It included a light blue cap, skirt and matching top with the navy colored ferry system insignia attached and a white collared blouse layered underneath. Short white gloves completed the ensemble.

My first duty before coming home, however, was to find the U.S. Coast Guard office in Portland, Oregon for a validated Merchant Mariner's card with an endorsement as food handler because the boatman's union didn't have a classification for my position. It was a hot, arduous day of pounding city pavement long distances to get a passport photo, take it to Coast Guard

headquarters only to find it was the wrong size, have it retaken, go back to headquarters, and then subject myself to fingerprinting and a background check. If a picture tells a thousand words, my second passport photo expression, a deadpan, shows my frame of mind that day.

I was to work with Purser Greg O'Claray, a former gregarious and likeable classmate at Juneau-Douglas High School who had acted as my son in the annual senior play. Now the tables were turned, but our history put us on an immediate footing so that we could concentrate on the newness of our positions. I would relieve the B Crew hostess, and she in turn would advise me about new developments before she went off duty.

I flew home, purchased my uniform, and was aboard aboard the flagship Malaspina with the A Crew two days later on May 29. I was 21-years old. My excitement the morning I was to report to Greg mirrored that of the town's. This new form of transportation opened a whole new mode of travel for us. When I first saw the Malaspina, I was struck by how much she looked exactly like the specifications: a sleek, seaworthy, blue and white sparkling beauty. As I stepped aboard, all was a blur of sounds and sights with vehicles of all shape and description being directed onto the ship by deckhands motioning and gesturing amid the din and excitement of passengers and spectators who met the ferries for a chance to come aboard for a quick look. Trying to hear Greg above the noise, I was directed to my home away from home, my windowless, one-bunk stateroom located just this side of the aft lounge with a sign above the door marked "Stewardess." It was to be a haven where I could go for a few minutes of privacy during the coming hectic days, and where I began documenting some of the shipboard life in a small journal accompanied by the diesels' pulse below me.

"It took awhile to adjust to sleeping on a vibrating bunk, but now it's like a second home," I wrote. "I have my own stateroom and share a bath with the

matron who also runs the gift shop and who is the only other female on the ferry." Soon the vibrating bunk lulled me to sleep, and today, whenever I travel on water, I often find myself getting drowsy from the vessel's rocking motion coupled with the sound of the engine's rhythm.

It soon became apparent that my work day required more than the 12 hours expected of me. Because the ferries ran on a schedule dictated by tidal conditions, I was expected to be in full uniform to greet passengers as they came on board whether it was 7a.m. or 3a.m. Much to my relief, Greg later relaxed that regulation if I'd already put in my 12-hour day. As a sign of the times, Greg felt responsible for me and required that I take meals in the officer's mess and never go ashore unaccompanied by an officer. This was the one restriction that chaffed. However, the Malaspina carried many dignitaries anxious to see how the new ferries were doing, and we were treated to such events as Skagway's "Days of '98" show playing then and a trip to Lake Bennett, B.C. aboard the Whitepass Railroad which then traveled to Whitehorse.

Aside from long hours, other adjustments included becoming comfortable with the protocol aboard ship and sorting out those who worked for the steward department from those with the crew. Also, I wrote, "Being the only female on the crew does have its disadvantages. They can tease unmercifully. But I've found each one is an individual, quite a few of them real characters, but they all work well together."

As I became more comfortable with my routine, I enjoyed mapping the beauty of the Inside Passage where the moods of the weather colored the landscape from several colors of misty gray to the blinding contrasts of glacier shrouded mountains and opaque emerald water, sometimes silky, sometimes foaming, but often teeming with dolphins, orcas or humpback whales. Some shorelines were so close, it seemed I might easily lean over the bow and brush a spruce twig.

Greg pointed out deer or bear as the ship sailed slowly and silently through these narrowest portions, and I sat in awe during a quiet evening passage of Wrangell Narrows where green and red buoy lights glittered like Christmas pointing the way through.

My assigned post was behind the long counter that fronted the Purser's office and the bow's 14 cabins where I learned there was more to my position than the job description. I filled out customs reports before landing at Prince Rupert, sold staterooms, and did other duties that were precursors to the future assistant purser position. Trying to speak extemporaneously over the public address system wasn't my talent, so Greg and I commiserated over content and I typed out cards detailing the routine announcements. They have become standard use, and now when I'm riding a ferry and hear them, I smile to myself.

Sometimes a traveling arts group held impromptu music in the aft lounge for passengers to enjoy. At one point, during a tourism workshop aboard ship, I was given two baby-bottle warmers; but I used them only once that summer. I did spend time with youngsters, though, when I played my guitar in the lounge and we sang some folk songs. I was a novice, but knew a few chords to get by. Several of the crew played as well, and they gave me pointers. One was Irving Igtanloc, the talented ship's baker. He was a warm, friendly person, and we all lusted after his sweet rolls.

One August evening there was a slight fire in the galley. I wrote, "It seems Irving spilled some grease on the grill. A waiter grabbed a fire extinguisher and put it out, but from the looks of the galley he managed to spray foam on everything but the grill--foam all over the place, in the pies, syrups, everything. But old Irving just slapped the crust on the pies and shoved them in the oven."

My first captain was Andy Hansen, and then for awhile, Herb Story, who wore

his cap at a rakish angle and reminded me of Humphrey Bogart with his crusty New Jersey accent and the way he sometimes talked from the side of his mouth. Greg and I were allowed to play the mood music of our choice over the intercom, but I soon discovered the Captain heard everything that came over it. “Capt. Story doesn’t care for the Kinston Trio,” I wrote. “Peter Nero qualifies though.”

I learned many other things, too, such as the meaning of murky, liquid of 40-fathom coffee, how to chart waters, though I’ve long since forgotten how to do that, the difference between a ship and a boat, and to stand clear of the spring line when the ship was tying up because it could take a leg off, or worse. I also learned something of the inner life that existed among the employees on board. The stewards often shifted between ships after the Taku and Matanuska came on line, among them many young men who occasionally missed the boat and thus were out of a job. I wrote, “Seems the Malaspina is in the enviable situation--that being the original or flagship of the ferries and we get all the publicity--quite a bit of competition about who’s got the best crew, service, etc.”

In memory, the picture of one colorful, tall, thin and wired 34-year old with a Greek accent stands apart from the other quietly efficient stewards of the fleet. We were never sure of what he told us, because his young life read a bit like a Greek tragedy and strained credibility. He said he was adopted at age 18 by an American ambassador to Greece who then died in a war. He said he had three children and three wives, the last one he’d left behind the Iron Curtain in Russia. He said he had gone from a concentration camp at age ten to the army, to working on steamships, to Hollywood where he says he played a lover in the movie “Never on Sunday,” to Alaska. One thing was for sure; he fascinated us. I wrote, “He says women destroy him and is writing a book on love, adventure, etc. It’s amazing how he is with children passengers though. Just kisses their

tears away and they adore him. Greg and I agree. He certainly lightens some dull days with his seven languages, tap dances, singing and pantomimes. He's dedicated to his work too. You ought to see his shipshape staterooms."

Of course, passengers presented many opportunities for growth. During one particularly nasty crossing of Dixon Entrance, people were getting sick left and right. Greg said once that the best way to combat seasickness was to get some fresh air, a real challenge with the vessel pitching up and down. As I navigated the ship checking passengers, in the aft lounge I came across a lady from the South in some distress. "Ah just can't catch mah breath!" she wailed. As the ship pitched, she sank her considerable girth into me as I struggled in my two-inch heels to open the door for some fresh air. I managed to pull one of the heavy, metal-framed chairs against the bulkhead and sit her in it. Within minutes she was refreshed and recovered. Greg's magic worked.

There were always passengers who couldn't be satisfied, but when that happened, I tried to remember the missionary couple from Holy Cross, Alaska. They traveled with six children, plus one on the way, from Haines all the way to Prince Rupert, the terminus of the ferry route at that time. The mother had a burned hand as well, but we never heard a complaint.

Of course, like any new enterprise, this one brought new learning experiences. I wrote, "There are a lot of things to be worked out yet. It's interesting to see this process work. It's exciting to be a part of the whole process in its infancy. I feel very fortunate to be a part of it all." One of the biggest challenges that summer was over a passenger manifest. These large poster-sized documents outlined reservations for the 14 cabins which contained two bunks and chairs, a coffee table, curtained windows, a vanity and bath with shower. (That fall the cabin capacity would be increased to 50). We received the manifests whenever the ship docked in Juneau. Arrows outlined the city

from which people with cabin reservations would board and also debark. On this particular southbound voyage, the manifest's arrows showed a tour bus loading in Ketchikan with reservations for all 14 cabins. When we arrived in port though, no tour bus appeared; so when we arrived in Prince Rupert, we parceled all the staterooms to the very travel-weary, northbound passengers. At that time, Highway 16 to Prince Rupert was a treacherous gravel road and challenged the most intrepid travelers now grateful for cabin space.

On the return trip north and the normal stop in Ketchikan, Greg discovered the tour bus waiting for us. He grabbed the manifest and poured over it. There in plain sight the arrows pointed to his original interpretation. But we were being greeted by the missing tour bus full of passengers expecting staterooms. There was only one thing to do. The procedure then was to give blankets and pillows to passengers without staterooms. We would have to do the same for the bus group. It was the only solution.

Many of the passengers, some of them quite elderly, were quite upset to learn they would be sleeping in reclining chairs with only a blanket and pillow for comfort. However the hour was late, the grumbling abated and the crisis passed. By the time Juneau appeared on the horizon, we began to receive some apologies for prior behavior. As one passenger put it, "Sleeping in those chairs turned out to be a blessing in disguise. We hadn't gotten a chance to know each other, and now we're having a wonderful time."

Such experiences were the wonder of that summer of my young life. But the real wonder was the magic of this new floating highway that heralded the freedom to leave a landlocked city, to travel easily most days of the week and affordably from one Southeast community to another, or even the lower 48. It would create an even closer network between communities. Adults and

students could take ferries to events instead of the more expensive and weather-dependent mode of flying by PBY, Grumman Goose or 707. Imagine. We could travel just for the pure pleasure of it!

Since that magical summer, I have enjoyed watching not only the growth of the ferry system throughout the state, but also the growing acceptance of women's roles aboard those ships. And now the Inside Passage is designated a national scenic byway. Henry Hanka of the American Byways Resource Center said the Alaska Marine Highway is "a very unique system. It's not like any of the other byways at all. It is one of those gems that you want to single out." But those of us traveling and working the ferries on our floating highway that summer of beginnings already knew that, two-inch heels and all.

Written by Karleen Grummett for the Juneau Empire

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